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## MEDIA

By Judith Adler Hennessee

# Mort's Magazine

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*US News Looks More Like Newsweek, It's Losing Millions,  
It's a Crisis Atmosphere. Mort Zuckerman Loves It.*

**T**here's a new team again at *US News & World Report*, and they're redesigning the new design and refocusing the focus, their fingers crossed that this time it will really work.

Revamping a newsmagazine is like turning around a battleship in a stormy ocean, and *US News*, the number-three newsweekly, is particularly creaky. It was badly managed, with all the leaderless sins of employee ownership, and had little visibility; it is still not exactly a household word, but David Gergen, the newest editor, feels much more confident now.

Gergen, who served in the White House, had no journalism experience. But now he has two old pros from *Newsweek*, Mike Ruby and Mel Elfin, to streamline the news operation. Clay Felker, founding editor of *New York* magazine, has been imported as a guru and is drumming up new talent and tutoring Gergen in the arcana of editorship.

Sitting on top of this eclectic pyramid is real estate developer Mortimer B. Zuckerman, owner, chairman, and editor-in-chief. Zuckerman, the source of all the flurry and scurry, is pouring money into the magazine in an effort to make it respected and influential. The money is part of the solution. Zuckerman, with his passion to reshape the magazine in his own image, is part of the problem.

Two and a half years after Zuckerman bought the magazine for \$163 million, *US News* is still lurching along in search of an identity. It is on its third group of editors under him, and sorting out the masthead is like digging through overlapping layers of the nine cities of Troy.

There still are remnants of the pre-Zuckerman Stone Age during which the "old-olds" flourished, a calm, slow time of peace and a little prosperity when *US News* was "the magazine that dared to be dull."

Post-Zuckerman, the Early Evans

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Age ushered in change and new beginnings; it paralleled and was followed by the brief and tumultuous Coffey Era, filled with earthquakes and volcanoes and populated by the "new-olds," most of whom survive.

In the aftermath came the current Gergen Era, with its layer of "new-news" (subspecies: *Newsweek* refugees), characterized by healing and growth but wracked by an occasional eruption.

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Ever since he bought the magazine and declared himself a journalist by fiat, Zuckerman has been having the time of his life. He flies around the world—Moscow, Bonn, Tokyo—interviewing government officials. Many of them are people nobody ever heard of, but he did get an interview with Kurt Waldheim in Vienna that was duly published under his byline. Zuckerman wanted it to be the cover story, but Gergen talked him out of it in favor of a cover on William Rehnquist, who had just been nominated to be chief justice.

Gergen isn't really a journalist, either. He served in the Nixon and Ford administrations and was White House communications director during Ronald Reagan's first term. This may not be such a terrible thing but it may account for the somewhat cavalier attitude among top management toward the separation of the editorial and business staffs, the journalism equivalent of church and state. When the Chernobyl story broke last spring, it was the circulation department, not the news department, that dictated the cover line "Nightmare in Russia."

"We have a lot of input on covers," says executive vice president William Harris.

The newsroom told Gergen that Chernobyl was in the Ukraine, not Russia, and the production people warned him that he would have a problem with the Ukrainians, who do not consider themselves Russians and are very aggressive

about letting everyone know it. "Russia had more 'pop' than 'the USSR,'" says Gergen. "Nightmare in the Soviet Union didn't work."

A group of Ukrainians picketed the *US News* building. "Gergen, Go Back to Grade School," one sign read. Gergen invited them in for coffee. "They told me Ukrainian history," he says. "I think the Ukrainians had a point."

Despite his inexperience as a journalist, Gergen is in demand as a talking head. His clout comes not from being the editor of *US News* but from his previous place of employment. It's a compromising situation, a newsmagazine editor pontificating on television about his White House connections. But Gergen is aware that he has to be careful. "It's very important that I be as objective as I can," he says. "I think it's good for the magazine. When I came here [in January 1985, as a contributing columnist], I was encouraged by Mort to give outside interviews. It raises the profile of the magazine."

Journalist or not, Gergen has a great many things going for him. He understands news and the rhythm of Washington politics; he can pick up the phone and get guidance, inside tips. "He has a good sense of where policy is headed, of the way issues and disputes are unfolding," says a new-old editor. "He is good at identifying where things will be in a week or two."

This very strength, however, weakens him as an editor. Gergen, whose instincts are centrist, edits like a politician seeking a consensus. Every opinion is presented, with the result that stories are often bland and have no point of view. Late on Friday afternoons, after checking with his sources, Gergen dashes off "Gergen-Grams," a series of points that he wants included in stories. "It's a strength of the magazine to be balanced and objective," Gergen argues. "It's also true that in politics you think of coalition building, of a core base and getting extra votes. It's very similar here."

Gergen also has philosophical concerns that are larger than those of daily journalism and antagonistic to it. He worries about the state of the presidency. "Whether it is Democratic or Republican, the office needs to be more effective," he says. "In the last six years it has been effective. I worry it has been an aberration, and I worry about the future. This is very sensitive. I think about it a lot; it matters to me a lot."

The magazine's political stories reflect his concern. When the Iran hostages-for-arms story broke, Gergen felt

balance was crucial: "I told people to say there was a series of blunders—Iran, disinformation, Reykjavik—but also appreciate that he [Reagan] achieved some things. I don't want tarring and feathering. The whole presidency could be unraveled."

Many staffers feel that Gergen goes beyond balance, that he is soft on the administration. (The White House, Gergen says, does not share this view.) "There were a lot of problems with the [Donald] Regan profile," says an old-old staffer. "Gergen was running interference for Regan. It was substantially diluted. There is a pattern of this. The same thing happened with Casey: He watered the piece down. It came out rather mild."

The CIA cover that ran last June is regarded by many reporters as the exemplar of this kind of editing. The premise of the story was the great resurgence of the CIA under Casey, and it was critical of him. Gergen had misgivings. "It did not have a response from high levels," he says. "The reporters were not able to

get to Casey. I said, 'It's okay to be negative, but. . . .' So I called the CIA, and Casey said to come on out."

Casey spoke at length on background, and Gergen rewrote the piece, softening it. Some staff members were aghast. "The reporters were unhappy," says Gergen. "I heard rumors that we fell for the CIA line, that we were patsies. I went to the reporters and asked them, 'What's wrong? I don't want to learn about this from rumors.'"

The reporters changed some of the story back, toughening it. "I was not going to be in a position that I played footsie with the administration," says Gergen. "At stake was the legitimacy of the magazine."

After the story was published, Casey called and screamed at Gergen that it was too negative, but it was the judgment of the staff that Casey had done a snow job on Gergen. "Casey was going around town telling people that *US News* never laid a finger on him," says a new-old reporter.

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